

Opening Remarks by
CHAIRMAN ADAM B. SCHIFF
HOUSE PERMANENT SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
ASSESSING THE U.S.-SAUDI INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY
RELATIONSHIP
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Today marks the 19th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, in which nearly 3,000 people perished, thousands more were wounded, and our nation awakened to the threat of international terrorism. The national unity and sense of shared purpose that we all felt in the aftermath of that tragic day has sadly faded, but the memory of that terrible day remains vivid in all our minds.

Nothing is more important to this Committee and its Members than ensuring that we avoid another deadly terrorist attack on American soil.

Today is also an opportunity to recognize the heroism and sacrifice of our Intelligence Community professionals who toil in the shadows, and often receive little or no recognition.

It is through their selfless efforts that we have prevented further attacks on our homeland, and through their efforts that we hunted down and brought to justice the mastermind of that heinous attack.

The nearly two decades since the September 11 attacks have seen our military and intelligence professionals deploy across the globe and partner with dozens of other nations to defeat an ever-changing terrorist threat. Congress, including this Committee, has approved new initiatives to help combat violent extremist ideology and address other root causes of terrorism.

And near the center of that work for decades has been the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In that time, and to this day, our intelligence services have worked closely with Saudi Arabia to disrupt al-Qaeda and cut off its financial resources, and to combat violent extremism. Yet confoundingly and despite this cooperation, entities and individuals in Saudi Arabia have been accused of propagating and funding violent extremists from Jakarta to Kosovo.

When ISIS emerged in Syria and Iraq in 2014, its leaders took inspiration from the same twisted ideology that was promoted by some Saudi clerics. And late last year, it was a Saudi military officer here in the United States for training who, inspired by al-Qaeda, killed three U.S. servicemembers and injured eight other individuals. The FBI has determined it was the first successful, foreign-directed terrorist attack on U.S. soil since 9/11.

Notwithstanding the Saudi leadership's strong public commitments to counter extremism, some Saudi officials remain reluctant to acknowledge the Kingdom's role, since 1979, in funding and

supporting violent extremist movements across the globe. As a result, Saudi Arabia continues to play both sides, working with us in some instances to counter violent extremism, yet turning a blind eye to other elements which support it and allow it to metastasize outside its borders.

Other recent Saudi actions in the Middle East—most notably the disastrous Saudi-led war in Yemen—have likewise unfortunately strengthened extremists who threaten shared U.S. and Saudi interests. Alongside the Kingdom's ill-timed oil price war with Russia and public reports suggesting that Saudi Arabia could be pursuing a nuclear weapon that would threaten the security of Israel and other U.S. partners, Saudi actions have left many of us asking a simple question: Does the United States have a reliable partner in Riyadh?

This concern has been heightened by the recent detention in Saudi Arabia of former senior Saudi officials with whom the United States had forged a close counterterrorism partnership—individuals who understood the importance of professionalizing and reforming the Saudi intelligence services.

That question came to a horrific head last year with the brutal murder of U.S. resident and Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the hands of Saudi intelligence officers deployed to silence a critic of the Kingdom's new Crown Prince.

Acknowledging MbS' apparent responsibility for the murder of Mr. Khashoggi, President Trump reportedly told another Washington Post journalist, Bob Woodward, quote, "I saved his ass" and, quote, "I was able to get Congress to leave him alone." And when asked by Mr. Woodward if he believed reports that MbS may have ordered the killing of Mr. Khashoggi, President Trump reportedly replied, quote: "No, he says that he didn't do it...He says very strongly that he didn't."

Unlike the President, this Committee is not in the practice of taking self-interested and implausible denials at face value. And I am confident that neither Democrats nor Republicans in Congress are going to stop insisting on an accounting and accountability for his murder—or stop demanding that the Director of National Intelligence make public its assessment of Saudi officials' culpability for the killing. Justice—as well as the law—require no less.

Congress also will not stop scrutinizing whether the U.S.-Saudi relationship continues to be a mutually beneficial partnership. This is especially crucial as the Trump Administration has granted Saudi Arabia the equivalent of a blank check. And done so often outside of normal, official diplomatic and security channels.

Since 2017, the President has looked the other way as the Kingdom dropped American-made bombs on Yemeni civilians. He has ignored credible reports of a global campaign to intimidate critics of the regime, and stood by silently as the Saudi government jailed journalists and women's rights activists, among them Loujain al-Hathoul, a young women's rights activist who has been detained and tortured for more than two years without charges.

Contradicting his claims to be ending wars and bringing our troops home, the President also deployed thousands of U.S. troops to Saudi soil—without Congress' explicit authorization and without a clear rationale for how their presence in the Kingdom advances our national interests.

This Committee has long supported and will continue to advocate for pursuing a constructive relationship with the Saudi Arabia, grounded in shared interests, rational thinking, and mutual trust.

In the recent past, Saudi Arabia provided important counterterrorism cooperation that saved American lives. Former King Abdullah's leadership in putting forward the Arab Peace Initiative signaled the possibility of normalized ties between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and its other Arab neighbors, in the context of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Saudi generosity has helped to address the humanitarian needs of the region's many refugees.

But we cannot, today, turn a blind eye to the Kingdom's current policies, which in several areas are not aligned with U.S. interests and priorities. Nor should we ignore Saudi abuses against journalists, against women, and against our own U.S. residents. For the stability of Saudi Arabia, with its rapidly growing population of young people yearning to enjoy the same freedoms and economic opportunity as other young people, is critical to the broader stability of the Middle East, the security of our partners, most especially Israel, and yes, our national security.

I remain hopeful that the Kingdom's current leadership will sometime embrace the potential for a mutually beneficial partnership with the United States, in the same spirit as our past cooperation. This would be more likely if the Trump Administration were to withdraw its blank check and condition U.S. support for Riyadh on its progress toward: ending the war in Yemen; refocusing its security services on ending the funding and propagation of violent ideology—rather than harassment and intimidation of civil society activists; and ensuring full transparency and genuine accountability for the Saudi government's role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

On all of these issues, we cannot and we must not sacrifice our nation's core values—or our vital interests—in the pursuit of profit or expediency.